

Build Ubuntu through Relationship

By Terrance Jacob

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I was asked to help a few predominantly Caucasian congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to plan and execute a multicultural outreach strategy for them as their neighborhoods were rapidly changing racially.

Being from South Africa, where we had a long history of Apartheid, I was believed to be qualified to advise! “After all,” they said, “you guys went from a harsh racist nation to being a ‘rainbow nation!’” (Archbishop Tutu’s description of the new South Africa.)

Before I agreed to help, I decided to visit these churches unannounced and anonymously. At one church, I was greeted by the designated greeter with a simple, “Welcome!” and handed a bulletin. I wandered in and found a seat. During the passing of the peace, I received many warm handshakes and polite nods. At best, there was awkwardness on the part of the other worshippers.

When the service was over, everyone rushed out past me, to meet with their friends and catch-up on their lives. The greeter, to her credit, stopped me to say, “It was good to have you. What is your name?” “Terrance Jacob,” I said, to which she replied, “What a nice name ... so easy to say.” That was the end of the conversation—not by my choice, but hers. That church got an “F” for readiness for racial diversity outreach!

At another church, I was given a bulletin and found a seat in the last few rows. During the “passing of the peace, I was simply greeted with, “Peace be with you.” At the end of the service, I followed a stream of people to their fellowship time downstairs. Nobody had invited me. I then spoke with the usher who had given me the bulletin earlier. He then asked if I was visiting.

Without asking me where I was from or anything about me, he asked, “I know this guy from India, maybe you might know him. His name is...” Now, I look Indian but I am from South Africa; further, there are one billion people in India. This congregation, who said they wanted to do outreach into their diverse neighborhood, also got an “F.”

Now I was ready to meet with the leadership. As we discussed their plans and

motivations, they listed many ideas: from block parties to food pantries and monthly free dinners. Without dismissing their ideas, I shared my experiences as described above. I shared with them that both experiences were far from welcoming.

On the contrary, the interactions made me feel more like an outsider. First, each of the greeters had engaged me based on our differences. Could they not just engage me as they would anyone from their culture or ethnicity—even ask me about the weather?

Second, they did not bother to get to know me. It was about them. The first was about how easy it was for her to pronounce my name. The second was about someone he knew in India. If either of these conversations went further, I would cut them some slack, but that was the sum total of our engagement.

When Jesus embarked on one of his “racial diversity strategies” with a Samaritan town, he started by sitting down with a Samaritan woman at a well (John 4). He asked her for a drink first; so his focus was her. He focused on what was common, rather than what was different: they were both at the well; they both wanted water. He then had a conversation with her about her life. He spoke to her about her relationships and about “everything (she) ever did” (John 4: 39, NIV). He did share things about himself, but only as they related to the context of the conversation about her.

When we engage people about themselves, we begin to build a relationship with them, we begin to understand them, and they begin to understand us. In the context of relationship, we are able to shape our future together. Our commonality brings us together in relationships; not as one trying to “help” the other, or making the other feel welcome, but one taking the time to get to know the other in relationship—almost incarnational, I dare say!

In Africa this concept is called Ubuntu: “I am because we are,” a biblical concept applicable anywhere.

So here are some basic steps to begin your outreach for racial diversity:

- Prepare your leaders first — the greeters, the frontline people and your congregational leadership — to be as racially competent as possible.
- Get some material to go through the process together or engage a consultant

to help you with the basics on race.

- Then have the same group trained in the exercise of building relationships and having one-on-one conversations.

How you get people through your doors is another matter, but once you do, you will be prepared to build healthier relationships.

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